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The Awakening: Passion Released. The Question of
Women

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ABSTRACT

My aim is the analysis of the way in which Kate Chopin illustrates the condition of women in the Creole culture of the nineteenth century in her novel *The Awakening*. Through the evolution of the protagonist's life, the author shows the role of women in society with the rise of the new feminist ideas. Edna Pontellier is compared to other feminine characters of the novel and of the American literature. Additionally, the different symbols of freedom that appear throughout the book are examined as well as the criticism the novel and Edna Pontellier's suicide had been written.

The Awakening / Kate Chopin / Feminism / The Question of Women

En este trabajo se analiza cómo Kate Chopin en su novela *El Despertar* ilustra la situación de la mujer en la sociedad Creole del siglo XIX. A través de la vida de la protagonista, la autora muestra la evolución del papel de la mujer con el auge de las nuevas ideas feministas. Se realiza una comparación entre Edna Pontellier y otros personajes femeninos de la novela y de la literatura americana. Asimismo se examinan los símbolos de liberación que aparecen en el relato, así como las distintas críticas que ha recibido la novela y el suicidio de Edna Pontellier a lo largo del tiempo.

El despertar / Kate Chopin / Feminismo / La Cuestión de la Mujer

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objectives

This dissertation will deal with Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*, focusing on the main character, Edna Pontellier. Her role in the Creole society of the nineteenth century, and her evolution from the classical mother and wife lifestyle to a new independent situation; the changes she goes through, what triggers them and their consequences in Edna's character and the reactions of the other characters. To do this, I will examine separately each of the women characters that appear in the story, comparing them to each other to the historical context and the different symbols used throughout the book. There will be also an analysis of the critics the novel had at the time of its publication and throughout time, always taking into account the feminist ideas that were rising and the Question of Women. The purpose of this, is to see the influence of Kate Chopin novel on the society, how the reactions to *The Awakening* differ from one decade to another, and to examine her vision on the Women's Question in relation to the feminist ideas, how much weight they have in her writing, if they have any, and the different responses and opinions her character and her decisions get. To see how passion is dealt with in the book and the critics' viewpoints on this.

1.2 Methodology

To achieve this, I have read the novel *The Awakening* various times centring the attention on Edna Pontellier, on Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reitz, on the symbols of freedom such as the birds, the sea, the Lady in black and the two lovers, etc. Along with other books which gave an overview of the strong Puritanism of the Southern States and the particularities of the Creole culture; a comparison between *The Awakening* and other books written by women in the nineteenth century; and the possibility to read different critics on the book of different decades and viewpoints. Once I have collected the information, a comparison between the main female characters and what they represent have been made, then the development of the

protagonist have been analysed along with its relation to the Question of Women. After that, the various symbolisms have been studied and explained, followed by an examination on the novel last chapter, Edna Pontellier's suicide and the interpretations and criticism it have received.

2. State of Question

When *The Awakening* was first released in 1899, critics and readers were scandalized by the themes it dealt with, infidelity, sexuality, etc. The character of Edna and her progressive detachment from her mother and wife role in search for passion and an independence that interfered with her marital happiness and the administration of her household seemed as a useless journey from which nothing good could be obtained. The novel was removed from all the libraries because it was deemed as a “sex fiction” novel by the *Chicago Times-Herald* (Chopin and Culley 149), “gilded dirt” by the *Providence Sunday Journal* (Chopin and Culley 150) and “an essentially vulgar story” by *Literature* (Chopin and Culley 151), along with other similar critics (Saphiro 115). The novel was soon forgotten and it was not until 1950s that critics began to take an interest in Edna’s story again. The book was seen by Jules Chametzky as an answer by Kate Chopin to the woman’s question, where Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reitz were the two female models of the time and Edna Pontellier explored how to be free in an independent self-referenced way but without isolating oneself from others (Saphiro 116).

Even today *The Awakening* arouses opinions from a wide variety; that is why it is such an important work of literature. It cannot be easily placed into a sole American literary tradition (Culley and Chopin 218; Saphiro 118); Edmund Wilson could not place it into the category of “a problem novel neither would he name it a feminist novel either. Per Seyersted on the contrary, understands that the feminist look on the novel is the fact that it talks about the protagonist’s feelings, her view on life, problems and awakening to sexuality and freedom (Saphiro 116). Lewis Leary attempted to put Edna within other fictional heroines who had failed to emancipate, but she differs from them in the lack of moral conflict in *The Awakening*’s case, she is sure of her decision and of what she leaves behind (Saphiro 117). Donald Ringe tries to situate Mrs. Pontellier among the American Romantic tradition; more specifically he identifies Edna with Melville’s characters, “a defiant soul who stands against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her”. However, the comparison is a little bit strained as Melville’s characters are able to live by the sea, while Edna dies in her rebellion to society

(Saphiro 117). *The Awakening* is an exceptional piece of literature because it has no parallel in the literature of its time.

3. The Question of the Woman

Women's vision of the world had been ignored and disregarded for most part of the recorded history. Seen as an inferior creature, if a woman wanted to have some self-renown, she had to defy society and risk their reputation to be able to express their opinion and, or exploit their aptitudes. Although women writers have existed for a long period, most of their works have not dealt with the need for freedom or to show the world that women had the same aptitudes, for science, writing, leadership; the same passions and feelings that men had. Women's passion and sexual desires have been concealed in a faded crude imitation of a childish crush in which passion has been limited to "grand" declarations of love and mindless immature performances that further indicate the need of a stronger, more capable man to control her. Not many male writers have tried to go inside a woman's mind in a realistic way while dealing with desire, and in most cases either the woman described or the writer have been criticized by society. And the novel *The Awakening* is not an exception. In this narration, the protagonist's feelings towards her own sexuality are not disguised by euphemisms or clichés that may subdue the reality of her feelings and because of that the author, Kate Chopin, and the novel were harshly censured by the society. And it is because of that faithful depiction that I have chosen *The Awakening* as the center of my research.

However, before getting to the substance of the paper, it is pertinent to place the book in its historical context to fully comprehend it; to know the position that women had in society, to look through the different social movements and school of thought contemporary to the author, the setting of *The Awakening* as well as the author's biography. The second part of the 19th century, and more specifically the last decade, was a time for social tension in the United States of America, the Civil War and the depression had emphasized the class divisions and various intellectual movements had emerged. The conventional way of thinking was endangered by Darwinism and a new criticism on the Bible questioned the doctrinal thought about human origins and the idea of fate (Chopin and Culley 117). In addition, by then, the Woman Question had been a matter of discussion for more than 50 years. Women started to claim for a more egalitarian treatment and rights due to their role in the Civil War; with all men fighting

in the war, women had to start taking care of affairs that were previously reserved for men, proving that they could work as well as any man and consequently, refusing to go back to their previous confining and dependent roles. Two suffragist organizations were born in 1890 to fight for women's right to vote and became quite notorious for the following years in Louisiana (Chopin and Culley 117).

Against these new tendencies, the rooted puritan morality became more rigid on society as a counter attack. This Puritanism was particularly stern in the Southern States where the avant-garde stream of thinking and industrialization did not have many supporters and the social divisions were deeply implanted. The Southern States were proud to say they followed tradition and did not cope well with novelties, they wanted to distinguish themselves from the Northern States and they have struggled to find a culture of their own which they could defend and identify themselves with (Bradbury and Temperley 120). This is an important issue as they believed that culture was what separated themselves from the rest of the States of the USA and they did not tolerate criticism against it or any attempt to change their social structure (Bradbury and Temperley 124). Women were considered not only inferior to men, but another possession of their husbands; they had no right to buy anything by themselves, to live by themselves, to have any possession, to have the custody of their children in the case of a divorce, much less to work, vote or have any legal position. They were under the protection of either their husband, a male family member, or they were sent to a convent. The ideal was to find a "good husband" and to have many children and to live only for them. But this puritan view of the ideal woman took another dimension in the Creole culture (Chopin and Culley 118).

The Creole women were the Puritan ideal, "beautiful, delicate, and always submissive to their husband who they adored and treated like a semi-God, venerating her own children, giving her whole life and strength for them". The fact that they usually came from big families and later on they would have it too themselves was admired and looked for in a woman. From an early age they were taught to take a special care in their appearance and receive a thorough religious formation (it was frequent for them to go to a convent for a few years until they are ready for society at 16 or 17), which ensures chastity until marriage (Chopin and Culley 120, 121). Although many advances had taken place in the role of woman in society; the fact that in New Orleans women had the

right to vote in the late 1890's (despite it was primarily to guarantee white supremacy); and that it was not uncommon to see women working and being more independent in the Northern States; in the South, divorce and any kind of rebellion against the male figures was still frowned upon. Women who were engaged in the suffragist cause or who tried to be autonomous were seen as a failure. They were presented as selfish people that did not care at all about their family and who lacked what made a woman be female, their true nature. They were generally shunned and isolated, and in the best of the cases, they were the entertainment of the neighbor, bind to society's capricious nature (Chopin and Culley 127).

Apart from the historical and social context, to further comprehend the setting, it is significant to know that the author, Kate Chopin, shared some similarities with Edna Pontellier. She lived herself within a Creole neighbor, as she was married to a Creole too, for decades and felt misplaced as her upbringing had been quite different to the Creole culture and felt unable to fully integrate. Due to her father's early death she grew up in an environment with a lack of male influence and therefore she did not receive the idea of being dependent to a male figure, while as it is said before, in the Creole culture the woman figure had to be controlled by a man, whether her father or husband. She also shared the feeling of abandonment, forlornness and "that sense of desire and lust that comes from unrequited love" (Chopin v, vii).

4. Analysis

4.1 Main Female Characters

The Awakening is centred on the question of the role of women in the Puritan society and the growing sentiment for them to have more rights and independence. Because of this, I deem important to delve into the various female characters that appear in the story and their different situations, the criticism behind them, how they interact with the main character and how they influence her, both conscious and unconsciously. On the one hand, there is the puritan woman prototype, the mother-woman, and the character that embodies the traditional vision of women through literature. This character is Adèle Ratignolle, of whom the following is said: “one of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. If her husband did not adore her, he was a brute, deserving of a death by slow torture. Her name was Adèle Ratignolle” (Chopin 13). About her, all comments are positive; she is the incarnation of the perfect woman. And even so, while being it and having no complaints against her, she is disregarded by her own husband and Doctor Mandelet by saying that she is capricious when she is ill. She is taken as someone clearly inferior compared to men, her wishes and complaints are ignored and she is overlooked by those who were supposed to be taking care of her. While it is true that Edna and Adèle are completely different the latter has an undeniable influence in the protagonist; she is after all her best friend and as suggested by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, one of the reasons for this character to appear in this book is to highlight the protagonist’s characteristics or differences from the other women shown traditionally through literature (Chopin and Culley 208).

Many times this influence is made unconsciously, but just because of Adèle’s presence, Edna Pontellier is moved to do things in order not to look bad in front of her and others. But Edna’s incompetence is proved just by comparison with Mrs. Ratignolle, such as when Mrs Ratignolle is sewing clothes for her children and Edna sews with her just because she does not want to be seen as a bad mother, not because she is preoccupied for the clothing that her children are going to wear in Winter, that is something she did not see any use in (Chopin 13; Chopin and Culley 208). But other times that influence is beneficial to the protagonist because, thanks to Mrs Ratignolle, Edna gets to enjoy the

Creole culture and be part of it, she feels at ease with all the forwardness and the freely spoken emotions when she is with Adèle and her reserves are mostly forgotten. Adèle is probably the very first person who sees the danger that is coming in Edna and Robert's friendship, she tries to warn Robert about his growing fondness for Edna and tells him to keep his distance from her because Edna could mistake his attentions for something more and take him seriously when she is married and not free to correspond him. What she did not foresee is the depth of Robert's feelings; feelings which are not fully recognized by Robert himself, although her advice does get him to think about them. There is something Edna says about Mrs Ratignolle, or rather, her lifestyle that is essential to understand Edna's final decision, "She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle - a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium" (Chopin 88).

While it is true that at times Edna does feel a little bit inferior compared to Mrs Ratignolle due to her reserved nature and her inability to place her children first in her life, and that there are times in which it seems like she is envious of the relationship that Mrs Ratignolle has with her husband; in general what Edna feels for Mrs Ratignolle's life is not envy, Edna thinks that she cannot feel real passion because she cannot imagine why anyone would be happy living under a husband's control, putting the children needs before her own, etc. That kind of life had not brought any enjoyment to her even when it had been herself the one to choose her husband against her father's wishes. She had deliberately married a man she did not love but who had a comfortable lifestyle and an admiration for her. On account of this, it can be said that, until the events that take place in the novel, Edna had been attempting to fit into a sort of Mrs Ratignolle lifestyle and character but after years of an unaware repression, she finally discerns that she will not be happy with that way of living, that she is not suitable to spend her life at her husband's service or to sacrifice herself over her children. With that thought in mind, she starts to neglect her duties and her appearance. Adèle Ratignolle plays an important role in Edna's change; she is a permanent shadow in Edna's mind that first allows her to start embracing passion in an innocent way, Adèle's free mannerisms coax Edna out of her shell. Once Edna tastes that passion she resolves to

get more of it and Mrs. Ratignolle transforms in Edna's brain; she is no longer someone to imitate but someone to differentiate herself from.

On the other half, there is the other main female stereotype, the artist, a woman who "in her devotion to art she seems to have become unsexed" (Shapiro 110), Mademoiselle Reitz. She is presented as "a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarrelled with almost everyone, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others" (Chopin 39). Clearly, she is not introduced as the epitome of women qualities, but her character does not get any kind of affection from anyone in the book either, in various moments in the novel it is seen that Edna does not like her, she thinks that most of what comes out of her mouth is venom and she does not feel any fondness towards her (Chopin 76). Nevertheless, it is quite significant that despite her obnoxious eccentric personality, Edna chooses to continue to maintain in contact with her rather than try to distance herself from Mademoiselle Reitz excusing her in the inability to find her once they go back to the city. In contrast to Edna, it seems that Mademoiselle Reitz does feel some kind of liking towards her, and she is received in Mme. Reitz's house warmly in all the occasions. She tries to warn her about the path she is choosing, the risks and difficulties she is about to encounter, however she does not try to stop neither encourage her and lets her decide her own future without trying to influence her (Chopin 131). This is probably because she feels somewhat reflected in Edna. She also was dissatisfied with what was supposed of her and chose to focus on her music career even if she gained with that the antipathy of the society.

But in opposition to Edna, she is free to do so because she is not married and she does not have children whose reputations can be damaged by her life decisions. That is why she feels the need to warn her, so Edna is completely sure of what she is doing and where she is heading, what she must be willing to sacrifice (Chopin and Culley 212). This character's portrait is surprising because one would think that with the depiction of Adèle Ratignolle, with the plotline of the story itself and what Edna Pontellier often says of marriage; the only female character without a husband and that pursued a career, specially seeing the protagonist's love for music and the impact that Mme. Reitz's music has on her, would have a better illustration. Instead, she is the character with the worse depiction of the whole book; this may be because her lifestyle is lacking exactly

what Edna is looking for, passion (Saphiro 110). Mademoiselle Reitz is alone, she does not have a husband and she cannot have a lover either, at least not publically, because even when she is not liked by most of the people and her way of living was not the preferred one for a woman at that time, she is still part of society. Passion is the one thing in which all the novel is centred and a life without it is not worth it. It is worse than living in a loveless, repressing marriage (Chopin and Culley 212). The only thing that is really worth in Mademoiselle Reitz's life is her passion for music, something in which Edna can relate for she has a great passion for music too, that is one of the main reasons for which Mademoiselle Reitz feels fondness for Edna, because she thinks that Edna is the only one worth playing for (Chopin 41). Edna has an artistic vein in her too; there are various instances in the book in which she is painting, yet, while she had given a thought to the idea of living like Mademoiselle Reitz and depend on her paintings, she finally decides against it because that passion is not enough for her, not anymore.

Both characters are opposites of each other; while Madame Ratignolle is loved by most, Mademoiselle Reitz is found to be disliked by many. There are details such as the clothing in which the characters are portrayed to make the reader feel that too. Whereas Madame Ratignolle wear clothes that show her elegance and that accentuate her fair skin and her delicate figure (Chopin 24); Mademoiselle Reitz "had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair (Chopin 39). But both of them know what the consequences of her love for Robert and her affair with Arobin can cause to her reputation and her family and both of them have a great influence over Edna but neither can stop her from her ending, she could have told them what was going on, she could have tried to get help from them but instead chooses to be quiet about it and end her life rather than endanger her children. Both women think they understand her but none of them really do, Adèle relates to her by affection, friendship and by the fact that she is also a mother, meanwhile Mademoiselle Reitz understands her passion for music and her artistic vein but they do not fully understand her sentiments. And among these two stereotypical characters, Edna emerges like a unique character that stands out by not fitting in any of the standard roles made for women. She is not a mother-woman like Mrs. Ratignolle but she is not a misanthropist artist like Mademoiselle Reitz (Chopin and Culley 198). As George Arms remarks, "Edna appears not so much as a woman who is aware of the opposition of two ideals but rather as one who drifts" (Chopin and Culley 176). She

starts trying to fit into the mother-woman role, after that she attempts to live as an artist looking for freedom from her marriage but that life lacks the passion she is seeking until she finds liberation through suicide. Margaret Culley expresses that idea too “Having dismissed both possibilities (...) Edna embraces death whose voice she has heard in her aloneness” (Chopin and Culley 228).

4.2 Edna's Evolution

In her journey to find herself and to find a place to fit in society Edna's character develops without noticing it. This change in Edna's life is not due to a sudden eye-opening event that transformed her, but rather a slow graduate development. From the beginning of the novel there are details that show how the protagonist's vision of not only life but herself too changes. At the beginning she is a respectable woman who is married to a wealthy business man with whom she has two children. She did not marry for love; it was more an act of rebellion against her authoritative Presbyterian father from whom she felt the need to run away, and Mr Pontellier, a Christian Creole was the perfect way out of her strict controlled life. But she had escaped from a life controlled by her father to end in another life controlled by her duties as a wife and mother. On the first chapters it is shown that she is unhappy with her life, and that her role as a mother does not come easily to her. It is said in the book that she is “not a mother-woman” (Chopin 12), and in another page she is accused by her husband to be neglecting her own children and him too, once awakened by him, she is unable to go back to sleep and she starts crying while her husband is fast asleep; “The tears came so fast to Mrs. Pontellier's eyes ... She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life.” (Chopin 9-10). But at the end of that same chapter, it is said “all declared that Mr. Pontellier was the best husband in the world. Mrs Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better.” (Chopin 11).

Edna's problem was not her husband or her children by themselves; it was her unhappiness with the life she had chosen and her discontent with her future. The problem is that her future has been chosen for her, she may have had a choice in her husband's selection, but she did not have another option apart from marriage, she had not think about it before because she did not knew there was some other election for a

woman. Once she is married she discovers that no matter how much she tries she is not like other women who are happy being married and then it is too late to change her mind. That is the first step Edna takes, she discovers that not all women are the same and she starts thinking about what makes her happy instead of forcing herself to like her choices. Edna's first changes are noticeable when she starts to defy her husband's authority in situations that at first are meaningless by small gestures. The first sign of change is when she goes back to her home after learning how to swim and her 'near-death encounter' and she chooses to stay outside at her porch rather than go back to sleep as Leoncé, her husband, had told her to (48, 49). This has been triggered by the previous exultation of learning how to swim and the following fright of thinking that she did not have the strength to go back to the shore and drowning there, but the truth is that this sudden change in her had been slowly brewing by having spent time with Madame Ratignolle but also, by spending time with Robert, a young Creole who had started following around Mrs Pontellier that summer.

Robert had started doing it without a real purpose; he was not in love with her at first, he had devoted himself in the same manner to other married women before, he was interested in them in a platonic way, a sort of courtly love in which he was the knight who served his mistress when she was not with her husband and the mistress allows him to follow her in order to be entertained through the day, but without any real love or lust intention. But this time, it develops from some sort of courtly love to a full passionate one. It could have been the fact that Robert is unable to act the same way he had done with the rest of his mistresses due to the fact that Edna gets uncomfortable with some of the liberties that the Creoles take so freely, one of them being the "serio-comic tone" that Robert would take with Mrs Ratignolle but that he never takes with her (Chopin 17). Adèle Ratignolle asks Robert to stop following Mrs. Pontellier just in case she makes "the unfortunate blunder of taking [him] seriously" (Chopin 31), however he ends up distracting her from the topic after saying that it is him the one who should be warned not to take himself seriously because "there is no earthly possibility of Mrs Pontellier ever taking [him] seriously" (Chopin 33).

This can be seen as a glimpse of what is going to happen, instead of laughing it off, or getting angry by the possibility, he refuses to continue with the subject, a clear indication that there is actually something going on. In a similar manner, we can see that

Edna actually cares more for Robert than what she is willing to admit for herself when she is wondering the reason why he had been spending less time with her, although he would double the efforts to please and entertain her the following day, that maybe she has been taking him for granted and now that she did not get the chance to be with him every day, she misses him greatly. After the first turning point, this breaking from the usual passive almost automatic submissive responding to her husband, Edna begins to feel liberated; she starts to enjoy her lasting days in the Grand Isle, “Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her soul” (Chopin 49). She has awoken from society’s deception, she does not have to be subordinated to her husband to be happy; she has the right to be free too, the same way that Leoncé had dinner out and went to play to the billiards when he was bored, she could have her own hobbies apart from her house duties. And along with her awakening, in the need for the exultation felt before, she begins to think more of Robert, to cherish her time with him and, without realising it, to search in him the passion that her marriage is lacking, the love that she had rejected so long ago. He reminded Edna her youth, of a walk through the grass, across a big field in a summer Sunday at Kentucky, running away from the Presbyterian service and the dominant figure of her father (Chopin 26-27).

There can be seen some sort of co-relation between her marriage, her submissive and social approved life, with the religious prayers that she was forced to do, how religion “took a firm hold upon [her]” until the summer at the Grand Isle; and the walk across the green meadow is that summer, and more specifically, Robert. Religion was forced upon her by her father; she had not thought if it was something she really needed or if she really believed, it was socially approved, the same way that she was supposed to be happy in her marriage. That walk across the green meadow is a break from society, she is once again isolated from society and she forgets about her responsibilities. The same way she forgets about her children and her husband when she is with Robert. The further away she is from her husband, her children and her household, the freer she feels; during her trip to the *Chênrière*, as she is in the boat,

Edna felt as she was being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening – had snapped the night before ... , leaving her free to drift withersoever she chose to set her sails (Chopin 54).

But once she gets in the church and the service starts, she begins to feel oppressed and drowsy, to a degree that she cannot resist the whole service and exits the church with Robert at her heels, worried for her. Religion at that time in the Southern States was very rigid and women were educated by it to be submissive and that their only role in life was to serve their family and husbands. By going on this trip, Edna is slowly rejecting these ideas and seeking for another role in life. By going to the church she is reminding herself that she is not doing what she was supposed to do, what was expected from her.

Her stay in *Chênrière* was like a dream, she spent most of the day at Madame Antoine's bed to recover from her indisposition and then she and Robert listened to Madame Antoine storytelling as they had lost the last boat to go back to the Grand Isle. This trip served to Edna and Robert to deepen their bond and spend some time alone, as if she was not married and they were free to be themselves. This change is tangible not only to the readers but to Edna herself too, after getting back from the excursion, she feels that something in her has shifted, not anything in particular, she could not explicitly say what or why, but she admits to herself that she does not see the world with the same eyes that she did before. She slowly begins to accept these differences and to discern how to act upon them (Chopin 63). And with this acceptance of her new self, comes her longing for having more time with Robert, who, in opposition to her, chooses to go away for the rest of the day. In fact, he decides not only to leave her for the rest of the day, but to leave Grand Isle for a long time. At the following chapter Edna discovers that he is planning to travel to Mexico, something that at first should not shock Edna as he had been wanting to do so for years, but the surprising part is that he was leaving that same night.

It is not said whether this decision was made overnight, before going to the *Chênrière Caminada*, or if he had made his decision from the very first moment he had set a foot in the Grand Isle that summer. Regardless of the moment he had decided this journey, he had not told Edna, and she cannot understand why not; for her, he was her confident, her best companion and she thought she was his too, that is why she cannot comprehend how he could have hidden from her such an important thing and be with her as if nothing was going on, as if their routine was not going to change (Chopin 65-66). What confuses Edna the most is that Robert did not consider relevant the fact that she did not

found it out from him; he did not feel the need to explain himself to her. There is a moment, just before he departs, in which it becomes clear that this sudden travel has a lot to do with Edna and their growing friendship, when she tells him that she was looking forward to spend time with him at the city in winter, he says that he was looking forward it too; He begins to say something but he does not finish the sentence “Perhaps that’s the-”. Perhaps that is the reason he is leaving? Robert had realized that his feelings for Edna did not compare to the ones he have had for the other women, it had stopped being a courtly love (Chopin 71). But for Edna this realization does not appear to be fully recognized until Robert is gone and her infatuation comes as a new demand to her new self. Instead of looking at his departure as an opportunity to get rid of her infatuation, she gets inconsolable and her conversations centre on Robert solely.

From this point forward, we can see Edna getting more and more audacious. The next course of action is to start ignoring her duties towards her house and her role as hostess and instead of staying home and receive the visitors, as she would have done every Tuesday afternoon for the six years she had been married to Mr. Pontellier, she chose that Tuesday to go outside. She had no particular reason to do so, she “simply felt like going out” (Chopin 80). After a discussion with her husband because of this, and once he is gone, Edna goes to one of the rooms of her house and has a breakdown in which she tears her handkerchief, she takes off her wedding ring and tosses it on the ground, stamps her heel upon it, trying to crush it, and flings a vase upon the ground, crashing it. Once she had heard the crash, she regains her composure and acts as if nothing had happened; she slips the ring back to her finger and gets out of the room (82). This is the first of a series of behaviours, situations and feelings that lead the reader into thinking that Edna might have some sort of mental disorder (Chopin VI). The same way that in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist says to be ill, to suffer from nervous depression which is reinforced and undervalued at the same time by her husband. Both women are unsatisfied by their respective marriages, and both are said to have a mental illness as a pretext for their dissatisfaction, as if no sane woman could be unhappy while being married. And this theory is proved in chapter 19, where Edna’s mood changes are explained, she would be very happy with no reason, happy just to be alive, she would feel adventurous and explore strange and unfamiliar places, she would like to be alone and unmolested. But there are days in which she would be unhappy, without any reason at all, apathetic to everything around her, she would find

no motives to be glad about anything, futile to be alive or dead, she would feel a permanent oppression against her soul and not deem worth anything, as all humanity was doomed to annihilation. Not that her unhappiness comes from her mental condition, but her mental condition comes from her unhappiness, but it is regarded as if it were the other way around.

Instead of worrying about her sudden outburst and her changes of mood, she uses them as an inspiration for her art. It is mentioned that Edna Pontellier knows how to draw, but it is not until this moment, after her discussion with her husband, that she resolves to take her painting seriously and dedicate her efforts and free time to improve it. With this in mind, she resolves to find Madame Reitz and search a lifestyle in which she can be independent so she can stop acting as the perfect wife and be the way she wants to be, “she had resolved to never take another step backward” (Chopin 89). Once she had found her, they talk about Robert until it is revealed that Mademoiselle Reitz has a letter from Robert. After much insistence and a passing advice which was also a disguised warning about Edna’s new goal of becoming an artist through her paintings, Edna finally gets to see the letter, a letter which only deals with Edna, questions about her, favours for Mademoiselle Reitz to make her, the prove that Edna needed to see that Robert was in love with her too. But also an attack to her heart; if he was so interested in her, concerned to know everything that had happened to her during that time he has been gone, why did he not write to her a letter like he had promised he would do? Even if it was just to tell her he had arrived safely to Mexico. After spending the rest of the afternoon reading Robert’s letter again and again while Mademoiselle played the piano, she finally goes home, with the same feelings that had awoken in the Grand Isle in summer and a permission to go see Mademoiselle Reitz whenever she liked.

At this point, Edna’s husband, Leoncé Pontellier, starts to worry about her growing detachment towards the household. Their relationship had never been as successful as the one of Mrs and Mr Ratignolle, but Leoncé was pleased with it as it were; she was not the best mother, but he was content with their life. More preoccupied each passing day, he talks to Dr Mandelet about his wife, to see if he can give him any advice of what to do to ‘help’ her to go back to her old self. Doctor Mandelet is a retired physician who does not have a high regard for women, when he is told the ‘symptoms’ of Mrs Pontellier, he underestimates Edna and her motives for acting that way by saying “Most

women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom" (Chopin 105). It is not until he gets the chance to see her in a dinner at the Pontelliers with Edna's father as the guest of honour, when he realizes what is 'wrong' with her, while he prays that the person Edna is in love with is not Alcée Arobin. The latter is an important character in the story, because while it is Robert who is Edna's love interest and awakens from her dream-like life; it is Alcée who arouses her from her dull impression of sex based on her marriage. They met at the races when Edna's father was visiting and he had been admiring her ever since. Yet, their relationship does not evolve until Leoncé travels to Kentucky, to Edna's sister wedding and their children go to their grandmother's house. Once she is alone Alcée starts to create situations in which Edna and himself can be alone. At first she does not respond to his advances and tries to send him away but he keeps insisting on seeing her until she cannot refuse him and starts reciprocating him.

But before she can delve completely into her affair with Alcée Arobin there are two events that are crucial to Edna's development towards her awakening. First, it is her resolve to leave the Pontellier household in order to move into a little house at the corner of the street where she can live on her own with some money she has inherited from her mother and whatever she can get from her drawings. Edna's marriage to Mr. Pontellier was based on financial security; she did not love him and her decision to be independent economically is an important step to self-reliance, she is breaking her bonds with her husband and her dependency on it. She gets braver and bolder in her defiance to society. Second, she discovers in one of her visits to Mademoiselle Reitz that Robert is coming back to New Orleans from Mexico. The man that has awoken her from her dull life is going back home, the man she loves and who loves her back is finally going to reunite with her. All the steps she had taken were made for her to be free from her marriage and enjoy her time with Robert once he gets back, and he is coming back from Mexico at last. However, before she can see Robert, in her excitement and happiness she gets carried away and she spends the night with Alcée. Devastated due to her betrayal to her love Robert and sad because she would have liked to experience all her awakenings with Robert instead than with Arobin. But her sadness is soon forgotten due to the excitement for her new house and her last dinner in the Pontellier household.

This episode is often associated to Christ's Last Supper, there are 12 people invited who are Edna's closest friends representing Jesus' 12 disciples, and it is the last time Edna is seen by most of them. The dinner begins magnificently, the table stood out and Edna glowed, everyone seemed to enjoy it, they drank and chatted about a wide range of topics. Edna looked like "the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone" (Chopin 141), but she begins to feel unhappy again, between all the people, her friends, she feels a longing that does not seem to have a cure. And then Victor Lebrun starts to sing Robert's song, the one he used to sing, and Edna breaks down and the dinner ends abruptly. Everyone goes home except for Alcée, who stays to help Edna shut the house down, walk her to her new home and stays with her. This abrupt ending foretells the immediate tragedy; it is a sign that something is going to happen. After the dinner everything gets better, Mr Pontellier learns about Edna's new house, and even if he is not pleased by her decision, he manages to create a believable story about her moving out because their house is going to be remodelled. Edna spends a week at the country to see her children and she seems to feel a new reinvigorated love for them, and most importantly, Robert comes back to the city. Their reencounter is awkward, he did not go to see her right away, it was a coincidence and Edna feels disappointed, she had hoped he would seek her first than anybody else and that he had come back because he could not fathom to be away from her anymore, but it was because business was not better in Mexico than in New Orleans.

After some days of not seeing him they encounter once again and that time they finally express their love for each other, but they have different expectations for themselves. Robert wants to marry her, while Edna does not want to get married again. She loves him, "I love you (...) only you, no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long stupid dream" (Chopin 172), but she had too much independence over the last months to give it away again "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose". Her thoughts on her marriage, any marriage, are exposed in many occasions; she says "a wedding is the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin 104), while speaking of her sister's upcoming marriage, or it is said that she feels "a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's delirium" for Mrs. Ratignolle's life. Edna does not want to get married again because it would place limits

once again to her life; marrying Robert will not make her any happier than being married to Leoncé. Edna does not believe there can be passion in marriage, not when the woman loses her freedom and everyone starts expecting things from her, her husband, society and at last, even herself. She believes they can be together without marrying, she can draw and with the money she inherits from her mother she can live modest but independently. Freeing herself from a marriage to end up in another is a step backwards towards society's conventions.

Before they can clear up their relationship and their future together, a servant interrupt to tell Edna that Mrs Ratignolle was sick and had asked for her. Once at the Ratignolles house, Mrs Ratignolle pleads her to think about her own children, about the consequences that her affair with Arobin and her love for Robert might have to her family. After seeing that there was nothing she could do to help, she walks home with doctor Mandelet, they do not say much but it is obvious that the doctor knows what is in Edna's mind and he offers her his help, if she ever wants to talk about her situation because he is one of the few people that will understand her and that can really aid if necessary. Nevertheless Edna does not want his help, she does not want to fix her marriage, she wants to do things her way without noticing what it will mean in other people's lives and most importantly, she does not want him to help her be the way she was before, "perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life." (Chopin 177). With that in mind she goes back home, thinking about Adèle's and Madelet's words, to find that Robert has left with only a note as a farewell "I love you. Good-by—because I love you." (178). Robert had not been able to stand by her side; he had not liked her aversion to marriage and had decided to leave her. This events leads to the final chapter of the book, and probably it is the most controversial part of the story. In it, Edna decides to commit suicide by drowning herself at the sea, making it look like it was an accident so that her children will not suffer for her life decisions against the society.

4.3 Symbols

At first this finale seems abrupt, Edna had been happy with the way her life had taken; she was a strong character who defied her husband, society and the role she has been

given, and from one chapter to another she decides to give up and commit suicide. It does not seem the same person as before, but when the book is read carefully there are a number of hints and symbols that are maintained from the beginning to the very end of the novel which anticipate Edna's ending. Some of these symbols represent the awakening of the main character and the changes in her personality, ones depict her lifestyle and others act as a warning. Among these various symbols, the first one is presented to us in the book even before the leading character, before any person appears too. It consists of various birds which represent her lifestyle. It is a very powerful symbol because in literature, birds have been commonly used to represent the soul, they are spiritual beings that are many times uncatchable (Taylor 9), relating them to the idea of freedom, of something that transcends the mundane reality (Saeed and Sharif 4); they represent nature, wild and free. Instead the first thing we are presented to in the book is to a pair of birds, a parrot and mockingbird no less, confined in a cage, submitted to the wishes of a man who is able to cease their every movement at any given moment (Chopin and Culley 196). And a parrot and a mocking bird no less because they are very social animals, they are known for being able to imitate the human language and for their distinctive birdsong respectively. But instead of being allowed to fly and sing they are restrained permanently.

It is quite explicit, the parallelism made by the author between those birds and women, in the mentioned episode when the parrot is sent away "to the darkness" because it had dared to express an opinion which was not appropriate in a social gathering, it is not even sent away by its owner but by a stranger, someone who should not have any power regarding someone else's pet, but the owner lets him shut the parrot up without any complaint. It is preferable to isolate from the rest of the society the individual who is against the 'proper' social rules rather than to face an uncomfortable truth (Chopin 37). "Kate Chopin ... has ... bird metaphors that allude to the dichotomy of incarceration versus freedom that also relates to a feminist view against the hypocrisy of a male dominated society" (Campfield 2009, 6). The next reference is much clearer for the reader although Edna does not quite understand it at that moment; it is when Mademoiselle Reitz feels for Edna's shoulder blades to "see if my wings are strong The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin 131). It is obvious that Mademoiselle Reitz knows about Edna's

love affair with Arobin and her love interest for Robert, her decision to leave the Pontellier household and probably her resolve to break apart from her husband. It is a clear warning about the courage she must have and the difficulties she would have to surpass if she ever wanted to fight against social rules.

This comparison between the several birds that appear in the story and the protagonist is not transparent until Edna decides to move from the Pontellier household, and move to a small house at the corner of the street, which is called the Pigeon house. At that point Edna does not care about what is 'proper' or not, but rather about her own wishes, which is why she is relocated to the Pigeon house. It is true that it is her decision, she is not put away by her husband, but what really happens is that she is isolated from the rest of the society and her children for the reason that she is challenging the standards of conduct in society. A place where she is not seen and where she can do as she pleases, have her own reunions that do not have anything to do with courtesy visits, her duties as a wife or mother, etc. It is ironic how the place she chooses as a rebellion from her 'cage', the Pontellier household, is called the Pigeon house, a bigger type of cage for birds that are domesticated but not 'good' enough to be at home (Chopin and Culley 197).

Edna finally does comprehend what Mademoiselle Reitz was referring to by testing her wings at the very end of the book, with the final bird symbolism. When she is by the sea, naked, with a final resolve to end her life by making it look as if she had accidentally drowned because she realized that she could not be free in the way she had intended. At that same page, there is a very graphic reminder of Mademoiselle Reitz's words, "A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water", that same bird is Edna trying to break free from her marriage and finally ending on the sea (Chopin 182). The irony of the Pigeon house, along with the Mademoiselle Reitz's cryptic message and the final reference to the wounded bird takes us to another matter; can a bird who has been confined all its life survive once it has been able to get away from its cage? It is common knowledge that if a muscle is not exercised it cannot grow strong, bird wings have to be trained in order to be capable to maintain the bird's weight while flying. Then how does a bird that lives in a cage train its wings? It cannot take long flies and therefore, it cannot exercise. Of course, this does not have anything to do with bird's anatomy, but it makes

us wonder how can anyone “soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice” when they have not had any freedom before and with the addition of other people weighting them down, such as in the case of Edna with her two young children, and with no real support, not even from the man she loves and who supposedly loves her back.

This whole idea of freedom takes us to the next grand symbol, the sea. The one place where Edna connects with herself and where she feels real solicitude. In many occasions the sea is presented to have a seductive voice which calls Edna to explore herself, to feel isolated from the rest and seek her inner desires and her true self, not that false façade she has had for all her married years. At that last reference to the bird symbolism, it is seen that the wounded bird ends at the sea; that bird, Edna, is not strong enough to fly above the social conventions, but it does finally get to its commitment, to be free. It ends in the symbol of freedom itself (Chopin and Culley 192). The sea is the symbol of freedom in the book. It can be seen that from the very beginning that Edna feels more at ease when she is near the ocean. There are small details that show her being much more relaxed when she is at the beach, much before she learns how to swim, such as when she is presented in the book (Chopin 3) she had left her rings at home being taken care by her husband while she gets to go for a walk with Robert. There is a clear symbolism in there, she takes off her rings, such as if she was taking off her responsibilities and duties, the chains that bound her in society as she gets to enjoy some kind of freedom with Robert, engaging in silly stories with no real hilarity unless you have been there. It is also significant that most of the times she is at the beach she is not accompanied by her husband but by Mrs Ratignolle or Robert, etc. It is seen as something sensuous, captivating, something that seeks for solicitude to get to know oneself properly and to know what one wants in life. (Chopin 21-22)

An important turning point is reached by the sea, Edna did not know how to swim, she was afraid when left alone in the sea. Everyone had tried to teach her, both men and women, children and adults, but that sensation of uncontrollable anxiety or apprehension did not diminish by their teachings and did not disappear unless someone there was someone near. Nevertheless, there is a moment in the book in which she suddenly feels confident enough to try to swim by herself, with no one near, and a feeling of elation is felt once she realizes she can actually swim. No one expected her to be able to do it but they all praised themselves for her achievement. In the zenith of her

euphoria, she refuses to go with the rest of the people and isolates herself from the rest; she decides to test her new found ability and to swim where no one had been able to swim before, further than anyone else. And there, she feels as if she is alone in the world, she pauses and takes in all of it. She had not gotten too far away, but when she turns back and sees the shore, at that moment, unaccustomed to that vision, she feels as if she is going to die there, unable to get the strength to get back. With much effort in order not to let the fear paralyze her, she returns back to the beach. Once there, exhausted by all the emotions, the swimming and the 'death' encounter she chooses to go home, ignoring the people calling her to stay at the beach. (Chopin 43-44-45)

This episode can be somehow compared to the bird symbol. When she separates herself from the rest it is very much like when she moves to the Pigeon house to get away from the society and enjoy her new found freedom, it is something she wants to do by herself, with no one to control her. The same way that when she is swimming alone she has to go back because she does not have enough strength to keep swimming, she barely has to go back even, it is similar to the advice that Mademoiselle Reitz gives Edna, she should be sure of her might because otherwise, she probably will drown, it fits perfectly with the scene. It could be seen as a first warning of what would end up happening, a peek into the future, when Edna realizes that she is not strong enough and lastly drowns herself. All these takes us back, once again, to the question of how can someone get the power and resistance that is needed if he or she had not have the necessary training to get it, if no one have let him or her be free, the same way that a bird that has been caged all its life cannot fly long distances at once without the proper training. The more Edna gets to be near the sea and learns how to control her fear of it, the more she takes her own wishes into account, she gets more daring and stands up for herself against her husband, etc. It could be perceived as if she was at first afraid of freedom itself, she had escaped from a very strict household of her younger years and she did not dare to take control of her own life, but as she awakes from her slumber-like life, and begins to explore her freedom, she stops being afraid and instead she wants to suddenly cut all the bounds that keep her from her desires at once. And once she understands that those bounds cannot be broken without hurting her children, she resolves to take the only path that she deems possible to absolute freedom; her own death masked as an accident (Chopin and Culley 195).

Another recurrent symbol which acts as a warning of what is going to happen to Edna, that represents the contradictory Creole culture, sensuous and rigid at the same time, is the appearance of the pair of lovers that are always accompanied by a widow wearing all black who is referred to as the Lady in black. These figures might have more than one representation; it depends on how many tokens are seen. First there are the two lovers who just want to enjoy each other's presence and company, always together so close that they could be seen at a distance as only one, talking to one another as if there was no one else in the world important enough, etc. And then there is the Lady in black, who is invariably portrayed to be near and holding her prayer items. In those appearances, while the lovers are at their own world, the Lady in black is always close by. Even when the lovers are at the beach trying to find a secluded place, the Lady in black is nearby "reading her morning devotions" (Chopin 25). If they are going somewhere attached together as glue, she is silently walking behind them (Chopin 33). And if they are just talking by themselves personal matters which are thought to be only their matter, she is, once again, mentioned to be around, even if she is not doing anything in particular, she is always mentioned along with the lovers.

On the one hand, it might be seen as two different figures and their comparison; in this imaginary, the two lovers represent Edna and Robert if they had met before Edna got married with Leoncè. Meanwhile the Lady in black represents the way Edna would have to act if she ever was to get widowed from Mr. Pontellier, and if she got divorced too. She would have to wear always black, covered completely; she should be proper and centre her life in religion, praying, reciting the Rosary, etc. She would not try to find another man, much less get a lover, she would have to commit herself to Mr Pontellier's memory, withdraw from life pleasures and delve into another kind of solitude that has nothing to do with the one referred to in the sea symbol. This one is not about finding oneself but about confinement. It is significant that she does not voice her opinion in any moment, because it highlights her lack of real control in her self-administered life (Chopin and Culley 204). On the other hand, if they are seen as only one figure, it may symbolize the truth that that sort of love does not last forever and that it usually lasts like the widow herself, the fact that Robert and Edna's love is doomed from the start, the fact that that relationship has an impending end whether they realize it or not (Chopin and Culley 167-191).

4.4 Suicide Question

Edna had been changing throughout the novel; she started as a devoted wife and mother whose reservations and introverted character isolated her from the Creole society she lived within. Her awakening is slow but firm, the more she learns about her inner desires and how to embrace them, the more she distances herself from her family, until she fully detaches herself from the false self she has built over the years and dives into the sea. And it is her decision to take her life away which is one of the central matters about the novel. There are two main points of view about her choice; there are critics such as Dunrobin Thomson, Kenneth Eble or Mary Fletcher that thought Edna's choice is a heroic option, a feminist ending which show her bravery by opting to end her life rather than continue living as a submissive weak person under her husband's control and her children's. The other opinion, illustrated for instance by *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, is that she was egoistical and did not think of the consequences of her abrupt death would cause, taking her for a coward that could not deal with her obligations and acted upon her own whims. The latter impression was the main one when the novel was published; the novel itself was seen as scandalous and improper due to Edna's affair but the fact that she did not redeem at the end and was proud about her decisions made Kate Chopin gain a bad reputation and the book and Kate Chopin herself were forgotten for a long time. Some critics, mainly contemporary ones, maintained that Edna was a selfish, capricious woman whose evolution was not worth telling and that her death was the result of her own foolishness and her incapacity of making the people around her understand her stance (Chopin and Culley 152), a stance which was hardly appreciated or understood, such as wrote in *Los Angeles Sunday Times* in 1899.

They thought that she was condemned by her own foolishness and that her ending was inevitable, and even that does not condone her because her repent does not appear (Chopin and Culley 151-152). As George M. Spangler says, the society was waiting for the proper punishment "Edna had sinned in thought and deed against the accepted sexual morality (...) her sin is required that she suffer and die" (Chopin and Culley 189). The other current of thought, appears much later, once the novel has been rediscovered, and the feminist ideas are settled within society; Kenneth Eble on the contrary, thinks that Edna's only fault is "her self-awareness, and her awakening into a

greater degree of self-awareness than those around her can comprehend, which gives her story dignity and significance” (Chopin and Culley 170). Mary Fletcher follows that line of thought and labels her suicide as a rebellion, the final step to total freedom and personal independence, better to be dead and follow your own path than to continue living as a hypocrite in a false and dull marriage (Chopin and Culley 173). This is the ultimate break from her role as a mother; she decides to suicide for her children, she does think of them as Adèle tells her to, but not in order to go back to her previous life and to her marriage, she does think of them because she chooses to give her life to them and die rather than to damage their image and dignity, it is better to be an orphan due to an accident than having a mother who does not follow society’s norms. Edna tries to explain it to Mrs. Ratignolle, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin 74).

But she also dies because of her children, “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them” (Chopin 182), “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 183). So her decision is for and because of her children (Chopin and Culley 179). This thought is directly connected with the Woman question, the idea that women had to stay at home and devote themselves to their husbands and children; they had to give up not only their life, but their selves, their wishes, their time and all their strength. This awakening of Edna can be related to the feminist ideas that had awoken by that time. Jules Chametzky makes this association too, and sees Edna’s ending as the price that Edna has to take for her freedom; it is her final parting from the role everyone expected from her, what society expected from women. Frances Porcher wrote in 1899 that Edna suicide was due to her realization that she was too weak to face her children and the things she owes them as a mother (Chopin and Culley 145); rather than being weak to face her duties she is caught between being unable to reject her children or accept the role of Creole motherhood given to her (Saphiro 108).

Between these two realities, the impossibility for her to be happy within the Creole stereotype of woman wins at the end; “Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him-but it was too late” (Chopin 183), Edna had made a

choice and she did not want to be helped, “the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone” (Chopin 183), she just wants to be free to be herself, as Margaret Culley says women are always portrayed as someone’s daughter, wife, mother, sister, etc. and to discover solicitude among all those connections, for Edna to discover “Today is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else (...) There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone” (Chopin 181-182) that she was alone lead her to the place where she first found it, the sea (Chopin and Culley 228). My personal opinion of that matter is that Edna’s decision was the only path possible for her, she could not go back to her role of a Creole woman, with her children and her husband; she could not distance herself from her duties as a mother either. She could not live as Mademoiselle Reitz; she knew that she was not fit to live as an artist. She could have visited Doctor Mandeleit, but she was too tired by the time she had thought about it. One may not agree with her decision, but she was consistent with her believes and she fought for her own independence, and even if that is something the contemporary critics did not appreciate, it made an impression on the society, although the society was not ready at that time for a novel that spoke of women as human beings that were beginning to awake from her submissive roles in life and who had sexual desires too.

5. Conclusion

It can be said that the importance of *The Awakening* in the American Literature of the nineteenth century resides in its uniqueness, on its portrait of a married woman unsatisfied with her life and her quest in search of freedom and happiness without giving up her newly discovered passion. Her vision on her life and the different changes she goes through, how she slowly discerns the differences between her new self and her old self. The reasons why a woman with a comfortable lifestyle, with an excellent reputation, highly regarded by her social circle rejects all the ideas and duties that society has bestowed upon her to seek passion. The novel might not have been written with a feminist intention, Kate Chopin did not write about feminism or women's rights. *The Awakening* does not deal with the unfairness of marriage, society inequality regarding men and women. It is not a problem novel and it does not have a moral lesson to be learned. Edna does not have an epiphany in which she discerns what is wrong or not, if she has the right to look for her own happiness by going against society or if the latter is in debt with her. She does not have any certainty that what she has done is the correct thing; if she would have been able to find a way of living in which she would be content if she had talked with Doctor Mandelet. There is no ideal ending where the heroine ends with her prince after he had awaken her from an eternal slumber as is she were the sleeping beauty (Chopin and Culley 2007), there is no ending in which it is shown that the protagonist's decisions were right because they had reached the desired objective.

Rather, the ending of the novel is an open one in which the reader can see whether that Edna had failed and that her decisions had led her to her death; or that she finally finds what she had been looking for throughout all the book in different characters that had not been able to understand her and to give her what she needed, that her death had liberated her from society's oppression and she has found freedom at last. It is a book which allows the reader to interpret Edna's life in many ways, even if her decision is not shared by the reader, Edna comes as a strong character which defied social conventions at a time when the idea of femininity was directly linked with marriage. The fact that it is not a feminist or a protest novel means that Kate Chopin wrote about the Women Question as a fact inherent to the society of the Southern States, to the classical structure of society. She was a writer ahead of her time, and because of that she was

harshly criticised by her coetaneous. *The Awakening* was forgotten for decades and once it was rediscovered it created another commotion, even today it is a novel to take into consideration for its singularity, it stirs many opinions regarding the position of women in society, happiness found in marriage, etc. And that is why Edna Pontellier's life is famous, because it deals with problems common to many women around the world in a realistic way without influencing the reader with ideas of right or wrong, generosity or selfishness, love or pragmatism; "It remains a book by a woman about a woman who could not find a place in the society in which she lived because she was a woman" (Saphiro 118).

6. Works Cited

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